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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPT'S PRESS SYNDICATE ELECTIONS

REF: A. CAIRO 2825

[¶](#)B. CAIRO 2896
[¶](#)C. CAIRO 2982

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

[¶](#)11. (SBU) Summary: Against a backdrop of recent government actions seen as restricting press freedom (reflets), Egyptian journalists from across the political spectrum competed for leadership positions in Egypt's November 17 Press Syndicate elections. Judges supervising the election certified Makram Mohamed Ahmed, editor-in-chief of the state-owned al-Musawer magazine, as the winner of the race for chairman. Twelve journalists, the majority associated with state-owned publications, won seats on the syndicate's board of directors. The results signal a shift away from a syndicate leadership controlled by independent journalists who view the syndicate as a vehicle for political grand-standing, to journalists associated with the government and more focused on professional issues. End summary.

[¶](#)12. (SBU) Although the campaign focused on a number of issues, including the plight of journalists currently facing prison sentences (Ref. A), issues of pay and the syndicate's role ultimately held sway. Chairman-elect Ahmed, widely viewed as the government-backed candidate, announced shortly before the election that he had succeeded in securing from the Prime Minister a pay raise for state journalists. During the campaign, Ahmed pledged to "depoliticize" the syndicate, which in recent years had come under the influence of Islamists and Nasserists and has taken political (often anti-American) stances on issues. (Note: The influence of the Islamists and Nasserists was evident last spring, after the Embassy's Press Attache was invited to speak to the syndicate. The invitation quickly became a political issue within the syndicate, with some members citing it as an example of "foreign interference" and warning of violence if the Press Attache tried to speak at the syndicate. Ultimately, the Press Attache canceled his appearance. End note.)

[¶](#)13. (U) Out of the 5100 votes cast, Ahmed reportedly received approximately 1000 more votes than his closest rival, Ragaa El-Merghani, managing editor of the state-owned Middle East News Agency. El-Merghani campaigned on a platform of "protecting the syndicate from foreign influence." He also pledged to maintain the syndicate's role as a venue for political discourse.

[¶](#)14. (SBU) Seven of the twelve new board members write for state-owned publications. The five independent journalists include three affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and two Nasserists. Together with Chairman-elect Ahmed, the seven state-affiliated members are expected to focus on

professional issues, including pay, pensions, and eligibility for membership. Their anticipated agenda will contrast with that of the previous board, which was controlled by independent journalists, four affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, three viewed as Nasserists, and one described as a "leftist." Under the previous board, and former syndicate chairman Galal Aref, a Nasserist, the syndicate became a venue for political discussion and anti-government demonstrations.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Egyptian journalists are not well paid (on average, they reportedly earn LE 500 per month, or approximately \$92) and often write for more than one publication. Assuming the elections were fair, and we have no reason to believe otherwise, the promise of a pay increase, and perhaps future improvements in working conditions, appears to have resonated more strongly with journalists than the prospect of the syndicate's continued aggressive political involvement. Moreover, some syndicate members believe the focus on politics in recent years came at the expense of the syndicate's traditional role of advancing the interests of the profession. The shift in leadership represents an opportunity to strengthen USG engagement with the syndicate, as the new leadership is familiar with, and hopefully will be more receptive to, USG outreach and programming.

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